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Moments of Being in Virginia Woolf's Fiction
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Virginia Woolf is recognized as one of the great innovators of modern fiction. Her experiments with point of view ... have influenced many writers that followed her. But one particularly interesting technique that does not seem to receive much attention is her use of "moments of being."

... to wonder why some moments are so powerful and memorable--even if the events themselves are unimportant--that they can be vividly recalled while other events are easily forgotten. She concludes that there are two kinds of experiences: moments of being and non-being.

Woolf never explicitly defines what she means by "moments of being." Instead she provides examples of these moments and contrasts them with moments of what she calls "non-being."

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Moments of non-being appear to be moments that the individual is not consciously aware of even as she experiences them. She notes that people perform routine tasks such as walking and shopping without thinking about them. This part of the life is "not lived consciously," but instead is embedded in "a kind of nondescript cotton wool"

It is not the nature of the actions that separates moments of being from moments of non-being. One activity is not intrinsically more mundane or more extraordinary than the other. Instead, it is the intensity of feeling, one's consciousness of the experience, that separates the two moments. A walk in the country can easily be hidden behind the cotton wool for one person, but for Woolf the experience is very vivid.

Woolf asserts that these moments of being, these flashes of awareness, reveal a pattern hidden behind the cotton wool of daily life, and that we, "I mean all human beings--are connected with this; that the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of the work of art." But the individual artist is not important in this work. Instead she says of all people, "We are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself"

Thus for Woolf a moment of being is a moment when an individual is fully conscious of his experience, a moment when he is not only aware of himself but catches a glimpse of his connection to a larger pattern hidden behind the opaque surface of daily life. Unlike moments of non-being, when the individual lives and acts without awareness, performing acts as if asleep, the moment of being opens up a hidden reality.

Moments of being can be found throughout Woolf's fiction. ... examine examples from her novels, *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse* and *Between the Acts*. These are often moments of intense power and beauty. Unlike Joyce's epiphanies, these moments do not lead to decisive revelations for her characters. But they provide moments of energy and awareness that allow the character who experiences them to see life more clearly and more fully, if only briefly. And some of the characters try to share the vision that they glimpse, making the work of art that is life visible to others.

Mrs. Dalloway presents the two characters who are most receptive to moments of being in all of Woolf's fiction: Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Warren Smith. Clarissa experiences her moments of being while in the middle of what appear to be trivial acts, indicating that it is not the action, but her awareness that sets a moment of being apart from her other experiences. For example, as Clarissa watches taxi cabs pass by she finds them "absolutely absorbing." Her thoughts reveal that "what she loved was this, here, now, in front of her, the fat lady in the cab . . . Did it matter that she must inevitably cease completely . . . or did it not become consoling to believe that somehow in the streets of London, on the ebb and flow of things, here, there, she survived," (9). Throughout the day Clarissa is particularly aware of these threads of connection between herself and her surroundings.

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The breathless nature of this single line indicates Clarissa's intensity. Images are not neatly arranged, but spill forth unstoppable as one image leads to another and another. Because

moments of being are immediate, they often do not allow a character to reflect or assign meaning to them.

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This leads to an important observation about these moments: all of them, beginning with Woolf's own childhood memory, are marked by particularly vivid and powerful language. Because these are moments of exact feeling, the language used to convey them must naturally be precise and evocative; the form and content must be in perfect symmetry. It is true that in a novel long stretches of narrative can be cloaked in mundane language: not every scene is of equal value or must carry an equal weight. But in her moments of being Woolf uses a language that approaches poetry.

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clarity is precisely what Woolf achieves in a moment of being. For Woolf the significance of moments of being is this: they reveal to the individual who experiences them the pattern behind the woolly curtain of existence; and the existence of a pattern reveals the possibility of connection to other people. When the cotton wool is rent, when one experiences a moment with full consciousness, one experiences the true intensity of life. These moments of being can be read as brief poems hidden among the trivial details of life that some characters--and readers with them--are fortunate enough to experience.

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